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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN VISIT TO DAMASCUS: DEVIL IN THE
INTERPRETATION

REF: DAMASCUS 579

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) According to his diplomatic advisor, President Sleiman reportedly is pleased with his August 13-14 visit to Damascus, although he had hoped for more on the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syria. The advisor believes that work will begin soon on establishing diplomatic relations and borders, but said progress on Sheba'a Farms was impossible for the Syrians prior to Israeli withdrawal. No date has been set yet for President Asad's reciprocal visit to Lebanon. End summary.

VISIT MEETS EXPECTATIONS,
FOR THE MOST PART

2. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Ambassador Naji Abi Assi, Diplomatic Advisor to President Michel Sleiman, on August 15 to get a readout on Sleiman's August 13-14 visit to Damascus (reftel). According to Abi Assi, President Asad, Vice President Shara'a, Foreign Minister Muallim, and two aides represented the Syrian side, while President Sleiman was accompanied by FM Salloukh and Sleiman's diplomatic, political, and economic advisors (Abi Assi, Nazem Khoury, and Elie Assaf), as well as the SYG of the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council, Nasri el-Khoury. Upon arrival on August 13, Sleiman and Asad held a 20-minute tete-a-tete, followed by a meeting between the two delegations, dinner, and then another private one-hour meeting between Asad and Sleiman. The following day, Asad and Sleiman held another 45 minute meeting before joining the rest of the delegation for lunch.

3. (C) Abi Assi, who had relatively high expectations for the visit, said his expectations had been met, especially on the agreement to begin the process of establishing diplomatic relations as of August 15, which he said was a very positive achievement. President Sleiman reportedly had hoped to get a bit more on the detainee issue. Abi Assi noted that the Lebanese opposition press was portraying the visit as much more successful than expected, but attributed this to their lower initial expectations. He also found it interesting that following the visit Lebanese OTV (Aoun's Free Patriotic

Movement's station) had asked FM Muallim about the detainee issue, whereas Hizballah's al-Manar had asked about the Middle East Peace Process, revealing where the two parties' interests lay.

14. (C) Abi Assi's impression was that the Syrians came to the meetings with the goal of helping to support President Sleiman (as shown in communique text in support of the National Dialogue under Sleiman, who represents Lebanon's unity) and skeptical of the Siniora government and March 14 in particular, especially after the attacks in parliament by March 14 MPs and a letter sent to Sleiman by the March 14 Secretariat immediately prior to the visit. The Syrians do not like to act under pressure, he explained.

15. (C) Abi Assi reported that everything that had been discussed between the two delegations was in the joint communique, whose length he deemed significant. The Syrians had started with a one-page draft, he explained, while the Lebanese had presented a much longer draft (Note: That Abi Assi helped draft. End note.). The delegations had limited themselves to discussing non-internal Lebanese issues, he said; internal Lebanese issues such as the Special Tribunal or the August 13 Tripoli bombing were not discussed in the general meeting, but may have been during the three tete-a-tete meetings between Asad and Sleiman. Abi Assi admitted that there may have been discussion of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, but nothing had been included in the communique.

16. (C) Abi Assi said that in addition to the "classical

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issues" of the Middle East Peace Process and Palestinian cause, the Syrians, as current Chair of the Arab League, had insisted on including language on Iraq. The Lebanese had inserted the phrase "in conformity with Arab League decisions" to ensure cohesion with the Arab League.

DEVIL IN INTERPRETATION

17. (C) The devil now, he said, was not in the details, but in the interpretation of the joint communique. For example, the paragraph on border controls referenced international laws, but would the Syrians interpret this to relate only to criminal actions? Already, he noted, the French translation of the document being circulated in the press contained several critical errors, citing the need to keep "government authorities" informed about detainee issues, when the actual Arab text referred to family members, and referring to "Sheba'a Farms" rather than the "Lebanese Sheba'a Farms."

18. (C) Regarding the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council (formed following the 1991 Lebanese-Syrian Friendship Treaty to deal with "exceptional issues"), Abi Assi said the Syrians wanted to keep it. The Lebanese position had not yet been decided, he said, noting that the joint communique merely said the issue would be discussed. It was now up to the Siniora government to decide its fate, although Abi Assi was not sure whether this issue would require two-thirds or simple majority approval in the cabinet. Some would argue that, now that Lebanon and Syria are establishing normal relations, there is no need for the Council, he explained, while others disagreed.

BORDER/
SHEBA'A FARMS

19. (C) On Sheba'a, there were three issues: 1) "Delimitation" of what actually constituted Sheba'a (which the two sides agreed to start according to the communique); 2) Sheba'a's identity, i.e., Syrian or Lebanese; and 3) "Demarcation" of the Lebanese-Syrian border. On identity, Abi Assi explained the Syrian refusal to state that the

territory was Lebanese in the final communique (despite previous public statements to that effect) because the Syrians viewed it as falling under UNSCR 242, whereas Lebanon viewed it as falling under UNSCR 425.

¶10. (C) Abi Assi explained the exclusion of Sheba'a Farms in the border agreement as the result of the Syrians inability to agree publicly on any issue that was perceived as being against the country's national interest. The Syrians do not like to act under pressure, he explained. The Syrians had wanted to say that border demarcation would be from the north and move southward (i.e., leaving Sheba'a until the end), whereas the Lebanese had taken the opposite position. The final text did neither, merely stating the principle that the borders would be decided.

NEXT STEPS

¶11. (C) Noting that cabinet would meet later the same evening, Abi Assi said Sleiman might use the opportunity to brief the government on his trip. The communique mentioned that Asad would visit Lebanon, but no date had been set, with Abi Assi opining that the Syrians would first want to see what the GOL's tone is vis-a-vis Syria

¶12. (C) Abi Assi expected to see ministerial exchanges begin soon, as well as a reactivating of the bilateral committee to discuss the missing Lebanese. He also expected meetings on border control to begin soon. He suspected Sleiman would instruct the ministries involved (Defense and Interior) to begin work immediately, although he did not expect quick progress on the issues of delineating and demarcating Sheba'a Farms.

¶13. (C) Regarding the Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council (formed following the 1991 Lebanese-Syrian Friendship Treaty to deal

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COMMENT

¶14. (C) Abi Assi appeared to give us a candid assessment of the visit. In part, he is positioning himself as an important interlocutor between the President and U.S., as shown by his final plea for us to share any information we had about possible upcoming regional conflicts, to help the GOL prepare.

GRANT